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September 2003

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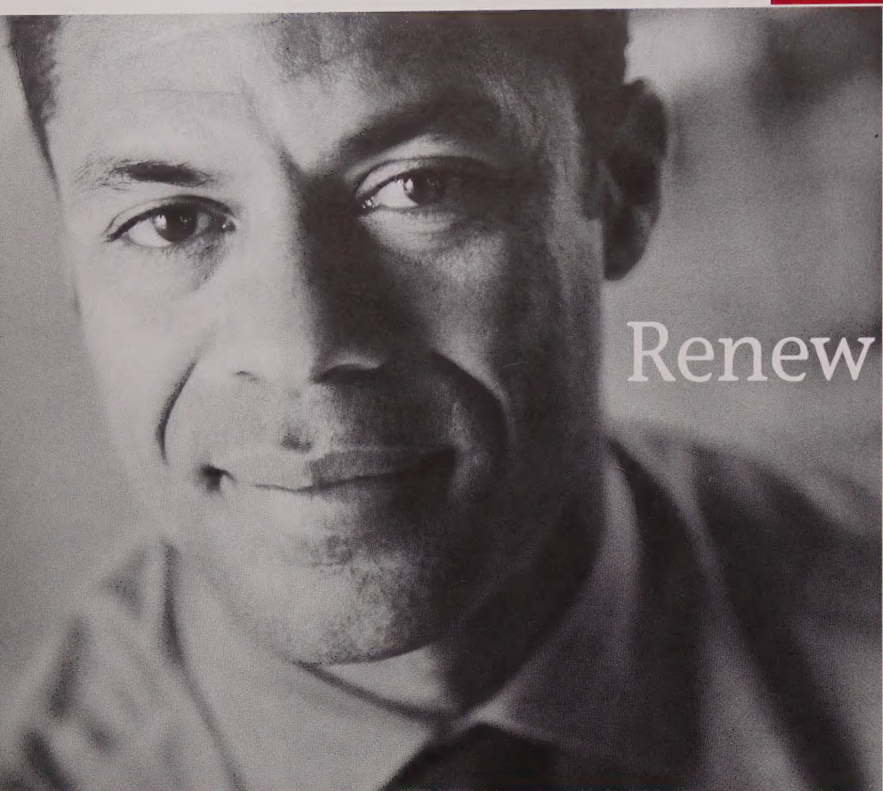
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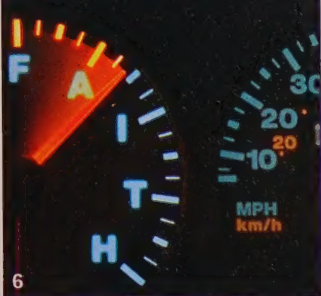
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EDITOR'S NOTE AND LETTERS

Dear Readers,

Lutheran Woman Today's in-box (for both electronic and standard mail) is hardly ever empty. We hear from many of you with comments about the magazine. Some readers write to share a general thought or concern. Others write to share an idea. Some readers write to share a struggle with their faith. Some readers are so touched by what they read that they just need to tell us how the magazine connected with their life. To all of you, thanks. Thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts. Even when you have to tell us you don't agree with something, know that we value your honest feedback.

In this issue, we begin a new Bible study titled "I Thank God for You!" (See the July/August 2003 issue for more information on the author and an overview of the study.) In this study, the topic of writing letters crops up time and time again. We hope you enjoy the study and find it meaningful in your life.

Nancy Goldberger, editor

Letters

Incarnation Lutheran Women had Elissa Davey as a guest speaker. Several years ago she founded the Garden of Innocence program in San Diego County. This organization of volunteers takes abandoned deceased babies relinquished by the county (after attempts to find the birth mother and a waiting period) and gives each one a nondenominational funeral service with music, poems, and stuffed animals. The babies are interred in small handmade caskets in a special section of a local cemetery, complete with markers.

Probably the most important thing given these babies is a name, often chosen by one of the organization's members or by a group or individual who has assisted this program, which ministers to "the least of these." How sweetly coincidental that two days after our meeting, the May *LWT* arrived with an article by Kirsi Stjerna titled "Names of Endearment." It spoke in an eloquent way of how each person's name is so

important during life's journey and how God knows each of us by name!

Greta Sandberg—San Diego, Calif.


Lutheran Church of the Incarnation, Poway, Calif.

About six years ago, Gail Ramshaw came to North Carolina to lead our women in a two-day event exploring language about God. Our eyes, ears, and hearts were opened to a wider array of metaphors in Scripture than most knew. Ramshaw taught us the hymn "Mothering God," which Linda Post Bushkofsky quoted in her May Grace Notes column.

I recently read Ramshaw's *Treasures Old and New*, a wonderful collection of descriptions of images and their layers of meaning in the lectionary. What a treat to have her article "The Triple Mystery" in the May 2003 *LWT* about the daunting task Christians face as we try to speak about God.

Marie Mauney—Old Fort, N. C.

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GIVE US THIS DAY

Harvest Home

by Marj Leegard

ONE SEPTEMBER EVENING WE SAW THREE LOADED WAGONS HEADING HOME, THE LAST GOLD AND ROSE OF SUNSET BACKLIGHTING THEIR SILHOUETTES.

Harvest coming home at the end of the day. I imagined the warm kitchen welcome after the cool evening, the table set, the food abundant.

The fullness extends from spring promise to autumn harvest, with people and horses and threshing machines and noise and fried chicken and pie. As kids underfoot, we were set to peeling and husking, setting the table and lugging water jugs.

In my jumble of harvest memories, one is prominent. The sight and feel of the grain, sun-warmed and pouring into the grain box in a full gold stream. As young as we were, we knew there was a connection between wheat and bread. We were aware that harvested grain meant taxes paid and mortgage payment met. The harvest abundance was also the end of our summer idyll.

The time comes in our lives, whether we are young or old, when summer dreams end. We feel both gratitude for all the gifts and beauty of life and the sharp, swift sorrow of ending.

For a time our lives were filled with hope and anticipation. We were young, and then some of us became new families. Others became parts of gatherings of friends and workers. Children grew and left home. Then we were suddenly among the retired, and summer was changing. This is our harvest home, peopled with friends and children and children's children. Our wagons are filled to the brim not with the won-

derful things we have done but by the grace of God with wonderful promises. God, who is Lord of our baptism, is also Lord of the harvest. The old steadfast promise is still there: "As long as the earth remains, there will be planting and harvest, cold and heat; winter and summer, day and night" (Genesis 8:22, Contemporary English Version). God who created the beginning and sustained the rhythm of life will also be there at the end of the season.

In our old well house there was a small tank. Icy water from the well flowed through that tank. We kept milk and cream in there, and at harvest time we put bottles of root beer and orange soda there to keep them cool. We had no electricity, and the cold drinks were a treat only at harvest. Our small son discovered that he could climb up on the side of the tank, plunge his arm into the cold water, and retrieve two bottles, one for himself and one for John, the thresher man. In those brief moments when the next load of bundles was still on the way, the two of them sat in the shade and enjoyed a cool drink. Because they were not discovered, these shady moments were repeated. Imagine Jerome's surprise when he went to treat all the workers on the last day and found nothing in the tank but water.

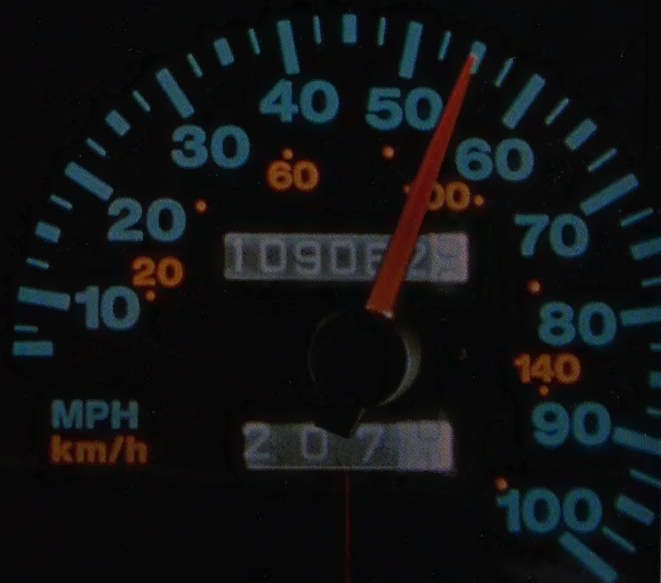
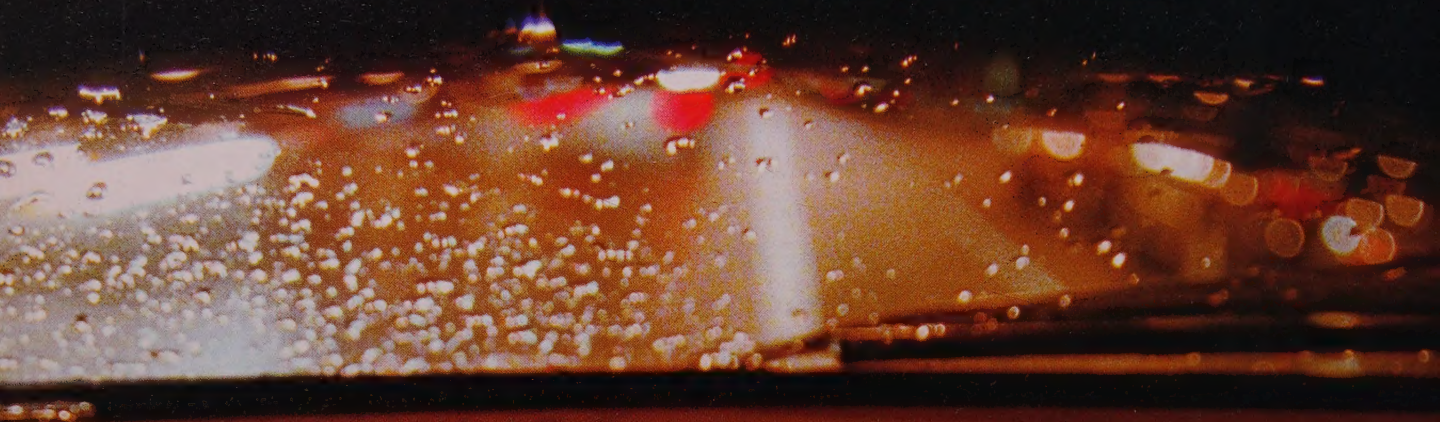
Earthly tanks are like that. Finite and ultimately empty. God's promises are like those filled wagons in the sunset. The welcome waits. Thanks be to God for our harvest home.

LWT columnist Marj Leegard and her husband, Jerome, live in Detroit Lakes, Minn.

Visible Testimony

by Mary E. Hinkle

Work and Witness in the Body of Christ



At college, my friend Mary Ann was an elementary education major. After reading theology for a few hours, I would take a break from puzzling over the meaning of life, God, and the universe and drop by Mary Ann's dorm room. There she was, cutting out construction-paper people for a bulletin board or weaving together pieces of yarn for an activity in her student-teaching classroom. I remember wishing my meaning-of-life classes had a bulletin board component.

A few years ago, after several years of keeping in touch only through Christmas cards, Mary Ann and I got a chance to reconnect in person. Now she was teaching kindergarten in her own classroom, as she had for more than 15 years. What was it like to be a seasoned teacher, I wondered. What sorts of things did she do all day?

To my questions, Mary Ann said, "I spend at least a third of my time in assessment."

"Testing?" I asked. "Of five-year-olds?" I couldn't imagine this. What about arts and crafts? What about coloring, playing, learning letters? What about snack time? Mary Ann told me a little about the assessments that five-year-olds go through and about the anxiety of some parents over things like whether an early reading score will go on their child's "permanent record." How early we start measuring these things!

Preoccupation with measurable outcomes happens outside the classroom, too. People in non-academic workplaces spend lots of time and energy measuring job performance, whether through sales figures or production numbers or other outcome-based standards of success.

Can we do the same thing in our faith lives? Are there measures of success for how well we are loving God and neighbor? Does the Christian tradition offer or encourage what might be called faithfulness assessments?

Lutherans are generally pretty sure that if we could measure our faithfulness, it would not be likely to show much improvement over time.

For several reasons, Lutherans tend to be suspicious of such language. When I asked my colleague Fred Gaiser that question, he replied, "The assessment Christians have is whether a person gets into heaven, but it's kind of hard for us to run the numbers on that right now." He's right, of course. And even if we could run the numbers, they might tell us only about the faithfulness of Christ and the graciousness of God, rather than much about ourselves. Remember the parable of the workers in the vineyard? At the end of the day, all are paid a full day's wage, whether they worked an hour or a full day. What kind of job evaluation is that? The assessments we're accustomed to making may not translate very well into the life of faith.

Beyond that, Lutherans are generally pretty sure that if we could measure our faithfulness, it would not be likely to show much improvement over time. At the turn of the twentieth century, prominent Christian theologians believed that this new century would be the time of great humanitarian progress. A "brotherhood of man" would soon come about, bringing with it lasting peace and progress. (How much even that choice of language says about the extent to which the theologians' own limitations were hidden from them!) Before two decades of "the Christian century" had passed, Christians were blowing each other to bits and poisoning each other with chemical weapons in the trenches of World War I. Given humanity's past experience with "progress," Lutherans tend to be suspicious of claims that human beings are getting better by any measure, either as individuals or as a species.

Finally, Lutherans also confess that much of God's good work in the world is hidden and therefore not measurable in any conventional way. With God, things are not always what they seem. Think about the pregnancy of an unmarried girl in Nazareth. Girls have babies every day. Could God be at work in something so simple, so unremarkable? Or what about the cross? An innocent man is executed by the state. A prophet is rejected by the people to whom he is sent, betrayed or deserted by his friends, and dies a brutal and painful death, feeling abandoned by the God to whom he has remained faithful and devoted. It does not look as if the salvation of the world is unfolding in such things. God's work—even God's work to make us new—is often hidden. Measures of success are difficult to come by because success is often difficult to recognize.

Visible outcomes

These difficulties with measuring faithfulness make the apostle Paul's comment to the Thessalonians all the more remarkable: "In every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it" (1 Thessalonians 1:8). Paul has here a list of visible outcomes for his ministry and for God's work among this little congregation. I don't know if Paul intended this, but his list of what people know about the Thessalonians sounds a little like (1) love—how they welcomed Paul, (2) faith—how they turned to God from idols, and (3) hope—how they are waiting for God's Son from heaven (see 1 Thessalonians 1:9–10). It is a triad Paul uses in several of his letters.¹

Paul has visible outcomes for his ministry among the Thessalonians. But here we see that *visible* is not identical with *measurable*. Imagine telling a friend, "I just got my scores back: I'm at the 45th percentile in love—not so great—but I'm off the charts in hope!" Or imagine hearing someone comment, "Last year, I

"Last year, I scored 80 points in faith; I'm hoping to raise that to 85 or maybe even 90 this year."

scored 80 points in faith; I'm hoping to raise that to 85 or maybe even 90 this year." The statements don't make sense. *Faith*, *hope*, and *love* are words that have to do with relationship; they are not quantifiable because other people are always involved, and other people so rarely behave according to our plan or speak the lines we would write for them! Faith, hope, and love are not skills to be mastered but qualities known in relationship with others. It would be wrong to think of them as measurable outcomes of a Christian commitment. Instead, they offer a visible testimony to Christ's work among us, as Paul points out to the Thessalonians.

For example, Paul commends the Thessalonians for the way that they "turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven. . . ." They have given up on the little gods of their culture, and they are living in service of the God whom Paul proclaimed to them, the God who raised Jesus from the dead. The Thessalonians are courageously and joyfully swimming against the current of their times. Are there similar testimonies to faith and hope among us?

A testimony to faith

In the late 1980s, I was serving as a pastor in North Dakota during back-to-back years of drought. Things were so bad that the government offered drought relief. The basic idea was that farmers harvested what little crop they could, reported that harvest, and then could receive government relief on a portion of the loss they suffered that year because of the weather. One of the men in our parish was explaining this to me one day, and he said, "You know, I got so little off this field that I could probably call it a total loss, but

there's a 10-year-old who works beside me every day. What would I be telling him if I just put the crop in the bin and didn't report it?" We both knew what he would be telling his son: Cheating is okay if it's the government you're cheating, or small dishonesty is not really dishonesty, or Dad cares more about making money than about telling the truth.

Telling the truth about something like that may not immediately seem to be making a statement of faith—a turning to God from idols—but the story has stuck with me for years. I see in it an astonishing willingness to trust God at a time when the present was difficult and the future was uncertain. My friend was a farmer. It had not rained in months. How much faith must he have had to refuse to “work the angles” for a little extra income? In my friend's mind, there was no need to compromise. His actions were a testimony to faith and to the hope that God would somehow make a way.

Paul also commends the Thessalonians for the welcome that he and his co-workers received among them. Are there similar visible testimonies to such love today? People involved in mission work often comment on the many ways Christ has preceded them to the place where they thought they were “bringing Christ.” In a humbling experience of reversal, the missionary is welcomed by strangers and recognizes the presence of Jesus in that welcome.

Charles Campbell tells a story about a Sunday-school class from Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta spending the night as guests of a homeless community in their city.

As the evening progressed—from the initial welcome to the cardboard hunt to the shared stories—barriers were slowly being chipped away as roles were reversed. However, the most important event was coming. As the chill began to set in and people began to shuffle around, I noticed that a homeless man—James—had quietly gotten up and left the circle.

He went over to a knapsack and rummaged around for a few moments. When he returned, he had a box of doughnuts that he had stashed away to share with the group of visiting strangers. He took the box of doughnuts, broke it open, and gave it to the person next to him, who took a doughnut and passed on the rest. I realized immediately that we were sharing communion. I remembered Jesus—now a black Jesus, a homeless Jesus, an oppressed Jesus—feeding the five thousand with a few loaves and fish. . . . James knew we needed to share a meal together. So he brought the doughnuts and gave them to us. And in that odd circle of strangers—rich and poor, black and white, housed and homeless—Jesus was present, and we shared food as equals. It was a joyful, thankful, eucharistic celebration, a foretaste of that great banquet when all God's children will sit together at table in shalom.²

Faith, hope, and love—for all that is hidden about God's work in and through human beings, sometimes that work comes clearly into view. The neighbors of the Christians in Thessalonica have seen something, and for that Paul gives thanks. Have you seen something, too? In your neighborhood, where have you seen God at work in the faith, hope, and love of others?

Mary E. Hinkle is associate professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn. She is the author of *Signs of Belonging: Luther's Marks of the Church and the Christian Life in the Lutheran Voices series from Augsburg Fortress.*

Notes

1. The most memorable Pauline verse listing these is 1 Corinthians 13:13. “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”
2. Charles L. Campbell, “Doughnuts, Coffee, and Communion,” in Stanley P. Saunders and Charles L. Campbell, *The Word on the Street: Performing the Scriptures in the Urban Context* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), 39.

A Spirit of Gratitude

by Kirsi Stjerna

AS I LOOK BACK OVER MY LIFE, I REALIZE THAT I HAVE SOME REGRETS. BUT SOMETHING FOR WHICH I AM GRATEFUL BEYOND BELIEF IS MY CHILDREN.

Of course, that spirit of gratitude is tested at times. For example, when my seven- and four-year-old have a screaming fit or rile each other up to the point of meltdown by teasing, chasing, intruding, or any of those other creative ways to drive a sibling (and mother) up the wall, gratitude is not foremost in my mind. And yet I am grateful beyond words for my children's very being and for the opportunity to have them in my life.

To think of my life with my children through the lens of gratitude gives me a different perspective. It makes those stormy moments of childhood less stressful and not worthy of the anxiety they may produce. I am also aware of other memories of feeling grateful, memories of moments that make me hold my children closer, tighter, longer.

I am grateful that I have "found" my children, many times.

My children are very active and outgoing. My biggest fear since their birth has been that they would get lost or be kidnapped. That fear has plagued me and made me overprotective and prone to panic. Those memories of actually losing sight of them!

I have one such memory of a Halloween party at the local zoo. We were on an evening tour at the zoo, and in only 10 seconds Kristian disappeared. There I was: running through the woods, calling his name in panic, without a trace of dignity or composure, imagining my little boy lost in the woods and being eaten by

lions or bears or whatever lurks in the Pennsylvania woods—such as strangers with evil intentions. Luckily, he had gone to the gift store, following a group of what he had determined were friendly people. His big sister was frazzled and started lecturing the lost boy, who, oblivious to the frightened thoughts spinning in our heads, was not quite sure why we were all so upset. I was the most upset because I felt at fault. I was tremendously grateful to have a second chance.

Later that year, we thought we had lost Kristian again. This time he had gone to a neighbor's house without our knowing it. In extreme panic, as his sister was looking for him and I was ready to dial the police, we found him. His sister gave him an earful again, revealing how much she truly loves her little brother, the same little guy she teases mercilessly on ordinary days. The relief of finding him made her vent our shared feelings of fear, anger, relief, and gratitude.

Kristian actually is the one who has stayed closer to home, being less adventurous and less prone to getting lost. Kiki's résumé in this regard is much longer.

Once, while entertaining herself playing hide-and-seek in the clothing racks at a large discount store on a busy night, she suddenly vanished. Call security, lock the doors, use the loudspeakers! My heart pounded so loudly that I could hear it in my ears. In seconds, Kiki's game turned into a 20-minute scare for us. She was found by the security guard at the other end of the store, looking at souvenirs.

These episodes still give me goose bumps. I remember the nightmarish fears of what could have happened,

the ice-cold feeling in my heart, the stonelike weight in my belly, and the tightness in my throat. And I remember my gratitude when the children were found.

My gratitude is tempered by the recognition that so often, for so many, such disappearances don't have a happy ending. Sometimes that panic-stricken yet joyful reunion never happens.

On our way into the local discount store, the children and I often look at the posted pictures of missing children. My children started our tradition of examining the faces as we enter the store. They had noticed the pictures and wanted to know what had happened. I have talked with them about the many stories behind those pictures, about the dark side of this world that they love with a child's innocence. We have had to talk about "bad guys," and we have defined the word *stranger*. I resisted these talks for as long as I could, not because I wanted to keep information from them, but because I dreaded changing the trust in the world that children often have. For me, at the time, these talks signaled lost innocence and a big step out of the world of childhood.

Of course, those moments of relieved panic do not account for all of my gratitude. Other kinds of

moments spring to mind: the miracle of conception, my survival of labor, the children's survival of delivery. Being grateful for the children's mere being, their learning to walk, talk, dance, sing a lullaby, draw a human being, read their first sentence, write their name, ride a bicycle, push the swing—and the list goes on as the children grow. (We've only made it to first grade and preschool so far).

I am also grateful for the simplest things, like sleep. At night, when my children go to sleep, I tiptoe into their rooms and look at them. They seem so flawless, so full of pure grace. All the failures of the day are forgotten and forgiven, and my heart is filled with gratitude. I want to wake them up and squeeze them tight and never let them go. My common sense usually wins, and I let them sleep. As I take one last look while tucking them in, I repeat my nightly promise to spend the next day with fewer regrets and more gratitude for every moment.

Kirsi Stjerna is assistant professor of Reformation church history at Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg and a member of Christ Lutheran Church, Gettysburg, Pa.



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URGING THE WORD OF GOD IN OUR LIVES CHRIST

SHE WAS SITTING CROSS-LEGGED on the cot when I entered the shelter. An open Bible lay in her lap. I introduced myself and sat down beside her, trying not to stare at the bruises on her face and arms. "I'm Pastor Granata from St. John Lutheran Church. The staff called and asked me to visit you. They said you were trying to figure out whether you should return to your husband and wanted to talk to a pastor before making a decision."

Maggie told me that she was a member of a church that believed the Bible was to be taken literally in all matters. Her pastor had visited her the night before and told her that, according to the Bible, she was obligated to return to her husband. Her Bible was

by Susan Granata

open to the verses he had pointed out to her, Ephesians 5:22-24: "Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands."

What was she to do? If the Bible was the Word of God, then wasn't she indeed obligated to obey that word in Ephesians and return to her husband as her pastor had admonished her to do?

It might be easy for many of us as Lutherans to answer this question, but it was a real dilemma for Maggie. We might declare her pastor's advice a woeful



misuse of the Bible, taking selected verses out of context. We could point to other verses in that chapter of Ephesians, particularly to the one that precedes verse 22, “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ,” as well as the ones that follow: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. . . . In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies” (vss. 25, 28). Read in the context of the surrounding verses, verse 22 cannot be a command for a wife to allow her husband to abuse her. Mutual subjection out of reverence for Christ and love of one’s own body would preclude abuse. The conclusion to be drawn is a matter of interpretation, but few of us would think that isolating one verse to arrive at a particular interpretation is a faithful way of using the Bible.

Our own struggles

Yet if we are honest, we must admit that we too struggle with isolated verses that seem to justify a hurtful position. Who among us has not grappled at some point with Jesus’ statement in John 14:6 that “no one comes to the Father except through me,” as we thought about the majority of the world’s population or even our kindly neighbor who is not a Christian? We take the Bible seriously, and so we are troubled.

The Bible is every bit as much the Word of God for us as it is for Maggie. We understand it as the basis of our faith and life. We turn to it in times of sorrow. We consult it when we are making important decisions. And indeed, we also lift out certain passages as a way of justifying our positions or explaining our actions.

Perhaps we need greater clarity about what exactly we mean when we use the phrase “Word of God.” It is easy to equate the Word of God with the words in the Bible, and it would be a quick leap from there to making the Bible into an idol and even an instrument of torment, condemnation, and destruction.

But what is the Word of God if not the words in the Bible? One of the best places to find that answer is in the first chapter of John. There we read, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us, . . . full of grace and truth.” What is this Word, which existed from the beginning with God, which is the same as God?

Obviously the Word of God is far more than mere words, either words in the Bible or words from a preacher. To begin to tap the richness of this Word proclaimed by John and reclaimed by Martin Luther, we must go back to the original language. In Greek, the word the Gospel writer used is *logos*. Besides meaning “word,” *logos* refers to the underlying reality of the universe—the truth and the meaning of life. This was with God from the beginning. More than that, it was God and became incarnated as the Christ we worship. The Word of God is life-giving for us. It is found in all creation, in the sacraments, and significantly, for Lutherans, in the Bible. Martin Luther said, “The Bible is the cradle in which the Word of God is laid.” When we identify this life-giving Word of God as only the words in the Bible, we fall into idolatry—idolatry of the Bible. We cling to the words themselves rather than to Christ, the life-giving Word of God cradled in the words of the Bible.

What is our golden calf?

It may seem strange to say that the Bible can become an idol. Usually when we think of idols, we think of lifeless objects like the golden calf that the Israelites made in the wilderness. Or we may think of more contemporary idols such as money, social status, or power. Actually, an idol is anything other than God that we trust will bring us the fullness of life for which we yearn.

Trusting an idol to bring us fullness of life is not only futile—by definition, an idol is powerless to do that—but worse, destructive. Think for a moment about

the destruction of family and self that results when a person makes an idol of his or her job. Life, instead of becoming richer and fuller, is diminished as more and more is sacrificed to the job.

Just as a job can be life-damaging when we make it into an idol, so too with the Bible when we make it into an idol. When the words of the Bible replace the life-giving Word of God found in the Bible, some kind of damage nearly always follows. The story of Maggie is an extreme example of that. Most are less dramatic. It is these less dramatic ones that we Lutherans are more likely to experience. For example, many women who cite the passage with which Maggie struggled have been criticized both by themselves and by their faith communities for choosing to leave a destructive marriage.

It has been said that something with the power to bring about holiness has equal power to bring about evil. There is perhaps no clearer example of such power than the Bible. When read as the Word of God, the Bible can breathe new life into us, help us to see ourselves clearly—and see both the hurtfulness and the graciousness of our lives. It can bring us to our knees in repentance, fill our hearts with gratitude, and comfort us in sorrow. But it can also be used to judge, condemn, and oppress people. When the Bible brings life to us

and to others, it is indeed the Word of God. When it is used to crush others or ourselves, it has become an idol.

There is perhaps no better guide to using the Bible as the life-giving Word of God than the one that comes from Luther. “When in doubt, choose the interpretation that urges Christ.” For Maggie, that would mean urging her to choose the interpretation of Ephesians 5 that would be life-giving as Christ is life-giving. It would mean interpreting the words in the Bible so that they are transformed from mere words into the Word of God. It would mean recognizing that any interpretation of Ephesians 5 that trapped her in continuing abuse would be idolatry of the Bible, which like any other idolatry results in destruction.

Maggie and I talked long into the evening sitting on her cot in the shelter. It was the first of many conversations. In the end, still uncertain, Maggie decided to let the words of the Bible be the Word of God for her and chose the interpretation that urged Christ.

Rev. Susan Granata is director of contextual education at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley, Calif., teaching pastoral formation and supervising field education for students. She previously served for 15 years as pastor of several congregations in Oregon.



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TELL US ABOUT AN EVENT IN YOUR LIFE THAT BROUGHT YOU A SUDDEN INSIGHT.
HOW DID IT INFLUENCE YOUR FAITH JOURNEY?

My precious 21-year-old daughter, Heidi, died on February 10, after a two-and-a-half-year battle with leukemia. She endured much along the way. From the outset, at age 18, she said that her diagnosis was a blessing. A grace like nothing I had ever witnessed came over this amazing child as she faced her challenges. "Leukemia has made me realize what my priorities are," she said.

A dear friend gave her a small tin box, the SFGTD box—"Something for God to Do." When things became tough or frightening, no tears or "Why me?"—just a note to God about what he could do to ease the situation.

And God listened to Heidi. God gave her time to make an unbelievable impact on all who loved her and time to make a difference in the world. In the end, isn't that what we all would wish?

Now my child is gone from this place, and my heart aches with pain. But I have new insights into selfless love, a giving spirit, and ways of looking beyond oneself to the needs of others. Heidi is urging us all on to make a difference in the simple things. It is in giving that we receive—Heidi knew this and forever will soar with angels.

Diane Schmidtke—Tonawanda, N.Y.

Last September, a sudden pain that would not go away called for a visit to the doctor and more tests. The conclusion: a tumor in my uterus needed to be removed.

My daughter and my husband were with me when I got prepped for surgery. We had prayed about this.

I was walking the hall with the nurse to the surgical room when suddenly I felt the presence of someone next to me, just enveloping me, and I lost all fear. A complete calm came over me. When I shared this with a close friend later, she said, "Joy, you are a woman of faith, and that presence was an angel." Wow!

The surgery was a success. I told the surgeon later that I had prayed for him that morning, and he responded that he had prayed for me, too! How did this influence my faith journey? I am much more aware of God's angels being present in my life and watching over me. What a comfort that is for me. Amen!

Joy Hagen—Webster, S.D.

My co-worker Rosalie was ecstatic when she learned that she was pregnant after 12 years of trying to have a second child. Tragically, she miscarried at five and a half months, after feeling the baby's movements for the first time. I felt anger erupt in me again. Two years before, I had experienced my fifth miscarriage and had stopped trying to get pregnant.

Rosalie shared with me her faith in God. Over the weeks, I saw her grief turn to acceptance and almost joy that her little one was in the arms of Jesus. My faith journey did a 180-degree turn: God was no longer a punishing God but a God who felt my pain. Now I often look back at my own life challenges as experiences to share with others in similar situations so that God can use me as a messenger of love amid sorrow. Today, my God is one of compassion, understanding, and love.

Ronda Caldwell—Payson, Ariz.



The Power of a Letter

by Victor M. Parachin

AS A SINGLE PARENT OF THREE TEENAGERS, Susan Morin had limited time and money, yet she had a deep desire to serve God. One morning she asked God in prayer, "What can I do for you? I'm always taking from you because my needs are so great." The answer came immediately: Pray. So Susan resolved to use the time during her daily commute to pray for whomever God laid upon her heart. That morning at work, as she was opening the mail, she found a note attached to a check: "I'm sorry this payment is late. I have been seriously ill. Thank you, Beverly Thompson."

Susan realized that she was to pray for this person. Initially it was difficult. She knew nothing about Beverly except that she owned a small bookstore. Nevertheless, Susan began praying for Beverly. She prayed that Beverly would have strength and courage. She especially prayed that Beverly would have hope and would come to rely on God as a source of comfort.

After a few months, Susan decided to send a note of support. She told Beverly a little bit about herself, described how she had learned of Beverly's need, and told her that she was praying for her daily. She offered spiritual encouragement, assuring Beverly that God loved her. Over several months, Susan continued to write notes but never heard from Beverly.

Then one January evening, Susan's phone rang. "My daughter and I have just been going through my wife's things," said the caller, "and we found your cards and notes. We wanted to let you know how much they meant to Beverly and fill you in on what happened." He told her of the last days of Beverly's battle with cancer. "We found your cards and notes tied up with a red ribbon. I know she must have read them over and over because they looked worn." Thompson explained that he and his wife were not particularly religious, but as a result of Susan's notes, Beverly had asked to be baptized two weeks before she died. "The night before she died, she told me it was okay for her to die because she was going home to be with her Lord."

What a clear and uplifting testament to the power of the written word. For many people, a letter is the most effective way of communicating heart to heart. Words that would be awkward to say in person can be powerfully and sincerely conveyed in a note. Of course, a spoken word of encouragement or support is always welcome to someone who is struggling and discouraged. Spoken words, however, live only in memory and thus can fade with the passing of time, while words of encouragement and support put into a letter can be read and re-read. Consider writing these kinds of letters whenever you come across someone in a difficult situation or simply wish to express your admiration, appreciation, or love.

A letter of apology. "A man should never be ashamed to own he has been in the wrong, which is but saying, in other words, that he is wiser today than

he was yesterday," wrote the eighteenth-century English poet Alexander Pope. At one time or another, every person makes a social blunder or hurts another person with a word or deed. Such circumstances call for an apology. Letitia Baldrige, author of *The Amy Vanderbilt Complete Book of Etiquette*, cites this example of a letter of apology written by a woman who made an ethnic slur in front of a friend who she did not know was of that culture. "In saying what I did, I realize I have offended you badly, but myself, too, because it was a cruel, stupid, and bigoted remark. I hope someday you will say you will forgive me. The episode has taught me a very valuable lesson. I am only sorry that, in learning it, I had to hurt a good friend at the same time."

A letter of condolence over a loss. The Bible instructs us to "have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind" (1 Peter 3:8). When people are reeling from the loss to death of someone they loved, a carefully crafted condolence letter can move them along on their journey through grief. In her book *My Deepest Sympathies*, author Florence Isaacs tells of a woman who lost a friend to AIDS. "We were in our playpens together and close all our lives. I tried to be there for him while he was so ill," she had remarked to friends. When he died, someone wrote these words to her: "I felt so sad to hear that time finally ran out for Walter. How large his loss to you. He was afraid of being forgotten, but I know you will never forget him. I also remember what a trooper you were during the worst times and how you stuck by him from beginning to end. There will never be another friend like him, but you are a one and only, too. You're the kindest person I know. I'm thinking of you."

A letter seeking to make amends and receive forgiveness. On November 18, 1989, Richard Luttrell, a Vietnam veteran, visited the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.,

where he left a note along with a photograph of a man with a small girl. The man in the photo was a soldier. Richard had killed him in battle.

Dear Sir,
For 22 years I have carried your picture in my wallet. I was only 18 years old that day we faced one another on that trail in Chu Lai, Vietnam. Why you did not take my life I'll never know. You stared at me for so long aiming your AK-47, and yet you did not fire. Forgive me for taking your life, I was reacting just the way I was trained. . . . Since that day in 1967 I have grown a great deal and have a great deal of respect for life and other peoples of the world. So many times over the years I have stared at your picture and your daughter, I suspect. Each time my heart and guts would burn with the pain of guilt. I have two daughters myself now. . . . Today I visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. . . . As of today we are no longer enemies. I perceive you as a brave soldier defending his homeland. Above all else, I can now respect the importance that life held for you. . . . As I leave here today, I leave your picture and this letter. It is time for me to continue the life process and release my pain and guilt. Forgive me, Sir. I shall try to live my life to the fullest, an opportunity that you and many others were denied. I'll sign off now, Sir, so until we chance to meet again in another time and place, rest in peace.
Respectfully,
Richard A. Luttrell

Unbeknownst to Richard, letters and artifacts left at the memorial are collected, catalogued, and preserved by the National Park Service. At the time,

Duery Felton Jr., a park service curator and a Vietnam veteran himself, was organizing a book project to be called *Offerings at the Wall*. He included Richard's letter and photo. Nearly seven years later, a friend of Richard's shared the book with him. Realizing that his hurt still remained, Richard resolved to locate the daughter of the slain Vietnamese soldier, though the odds of success were slim.

He was able to persuade a newspaper in Hanoi to publish the photograph and an accompanying article. A copy of the paper made its way to a tiny farming village where the family of the soldier recognized his picture. Soon afterward, Richard received a short letter from a woman named Lan. Her message read: "Dear Mr. Richard, the child you have taken care of through the picture, for over 30 years, she becomes an adult now, and she has spent so much suffering in her childhood by the missing of her father. I hope you will bring the joy and happiness to my family."

He immediately wrote back, asking if he could visit her in Vietnam. Soon Richard traveled to Vietnam, the first time he had been back in 32 years. There he met Lan face to face. She burst into tears. "I'm so sorry," he said to her, also crying. Lan embraced Richard and forgave him. The photograph of her with her father now stands on a small table in Lan's home.

That reconciliation began because a letter was written. You never know what might happen if you pick up pen and paper. The key is to do it without delay. Today, think of someone who needs to hear from you and write to that person. Like Susan and Richard, you just might change someone's life—even your own.

Victor M. Parachin, an ordained minister and educator, is the author of several books, including *Healing Grief* (Chalice Press).

HOW DOES YOUR GROUP OR CONGREGATION INVITE LOCAL COLLEGE STUDENTS INTO THE LIFE OF YOUR COMMUNITY?

Our congregation has been involved in campus ministry with Lehigh University for more than 50 years. Food is often what brings students to events—pizza, homemade soup, ice cream, and brownies are all favorites.

At exam time students are given snack bags filled with good energy snacks, new pens and pencils, fun surprises, and a note reminding them that their family at St. Peter's is praying for them.

Elizabeth M. Elterich—Bethlehem, Pa.

St. Peter's Lutheran Church

"First Sunday Fellowship," chaired by our fellowship committee, is held on the first Sunday of each month during the school year. Several groups in the congregation work together and serve noon lunch to our local college students. Church members are also encouraged to attend and visit with these young people. We try to prepare homemade items—just like what Mom would make at home.

Pam Neumiller—Fargo, N.D.

Peace Lutheran Church

Thanks to an invitation a few years ago by our pastor to the community service office of Fordham University, a great collaboration began. Each August, incoming freshmen participate in Fordham's Urban Immersion Program. They visit Epiphany Lutheran Church (among other sites) to learn about our programs and our neighborhood. The freshmen are a gift of youthful energy and enthusiasm!

One of the many services provided by Epiphany is the St. Stephen Meals Program, which provides free lunches four days a week to the community. Students graciously assist with setting up tables and serving guests, and the "Big Brothers" of Fordham painted the church basement where this program is held. In addition, Fordham students provide invaluable mentoring to neighborhood youth through Epiphany's mentoring program. Students know that if they choose to worship with us, they will find a warm and welcoming family here. Thanks be to God for this partnership.

Dorothy Hillis—Yonkers, N.Y.

Epiphany Lutheran Church

Our congregation supports students at Arizona State University and helps them to be stronger members of the church and the larger community. Prior to their arrival, we send students materials about our events. When they arrive, we hand out bottles of water labeled with our contact information, meeting and worship times, and a map showing our location.

We also participate in a fair that highlights campus student organizations. During that week, we host worship services and open houses. We are also involved with Lutheran Student Movement, a pan-Lutheran organization that serves as a voice for the student population to the churches at large.

Evan Moilan, Lutheran campus minister

Arizona State University—Tempe, Ariz.



COMPANIONS

My brother, Philip, is someone I truly love.

Yet loving Philip and having him love me doesn't mean that I always get my way with him. I've had to learn to share. I've had to admit sometimes that I was wrong, and even worse, that Philip was right. Due to our closeness in age (I'm one year older), Philip and I have always been together. At one point we even shared a room. But when he first arrived, I was not willing to share our parents' and grandparents' attention.

A jealous older sister, I sometimes did miserable things to my little brother. Perhaps all older siblings do such things, but that doesn't excuse how I treated Philip. I've heard horrible stories about my meanness, but they pale in comparison to the things I remember myself. His birthday is three weeks after mine, which used to infuriate me. When he turned four, I did my

It has been something I could trust. The more I've thought about it—and I've been thinking about my neighbor's admonition for nearly 20 years—the more I've realized that love is the thing you can take with you wherever you go and whatever you do.

We're all on a journey, and on that journey we hope to discover and become the best version of

ON THE JOURNEY

by Karris Golden

best to ruin his birthday party. Our dad finally had to quarantine me. That same year, our grandmother unknowingly gave Philip the Christmas present I desperately wanted—a plastic guitar. I broke it over my knee right in front of him. I don't remember why I wanted a plastic guitar, but I still cringe at this memory.

Despite my meanness, sweet Philip really loved me. His love was unconditional and undiminished by my ill treatment. He wanted to be with me all the time, and those who picked on him quickly heard his proud proclamation that they would have to deal with his big sister. I'm still not sure why Philip was able to see beyond my selfishness and cruelty, but I'm glad he did. He taught me what it means to really love someone, even if the person doesn't seem to deserve it.

As we grew up, Philip and I had typical brother-sister quarrels. We used to fight both with words and with fists. A neighbor once told me, "You shouldn't fight with your brother. When everyone else is gone, your brother is the one who will be there." At the time, I thought she was ridiculously uninformed. Surely there would be others besides Philip on whom I could rely. Yet as I grew older and experienced more of life, I began to realize that there are precious few people whom I love as I love Philip and who love me as Philip does. I have never doubted his love for me.

ourselves we can possibly be. We don't know how long we have for the trip, so we can take only the essentials. Fancy job titles, possessions, and other things will have to make way for the lessons we learn and the people we love.

COMPANIONS WHO CHALLENGE US

The loving people who are our companions on our journey must challenge, engage, and enlighten us. They must bring out something in us that we are incapable of cultivating on our own. They don't simply say what we *want* to hear but instead tell us what we *need* to hear. Our ordinary journey becomes an amazing adventure when we give and receive love.

Most of my loved ones, both family and friends, chose me as much as I chose them. They have stood by me when I was at my worst, and they have been with me as we shared the best times. Philip is one who chose me. I was ready to dismiss him as someone I didn't need. Eventually, I understood how wrong I was. Philip says things to me that I find tough to hear, and I listen because I know he doesn't take our relationship lightly. When we were teenagers, his love taught me to appreciate him as a brother and a friend. In our adulthood, he has been there when others were not, and I have tried to do the same for him.

If we surround ourselves with people whom we truly love and who love us in return, we're on the right path. We need to seek out those who bring out the best in us, which will lead us far beyond the ties of family, age, race, or gender. We invite these friends into our families. They are the people we trust will tell us the truth. We respect the truth they tell even when it hurts. We don't shut them off, because we can't separate ourselves from the truth that we need to hear from them.

The love of these trusted companions is God's gift to us. It bolsters us, comforts us, and carries us through.



It teaches, nourishes, and sustains us, reminding us in a small way of the capacity of God's loving heart.

As we receive this gift of love, we realize that we are bound to pass on this love to others, regardless of whether we believe them to be deserving or not. This lesson is not an easy one to learn. We sometimes look for a reason to share God's love—or worse, a reason not to share it. Unfortunately, the people who seem the most unlovable may be the very people who need the gift of love the most. Yet we withhold this gift given to us so freely by God and by our inner circle of family and friends. My heart feels heavy when I take honest stock of my complicity in such behavior.

When I was growing up, I often saw Pete riding his bicycle around town. My mom told me he'd been

doing that since she was a little girl, because he could not drive a car. As a child, I did not realize Pete had developmental challenges. Pete was a regular at all of the freewill-offering dinners my church hosted. A few people “tsk-tsked” because Pete always took second helpings but never put any money in the offering basket. They also cast a disapproving eye on anyone who paid for Pete's meal when the dinners weren't free. One person even wondered aloud about asking the pastor to force Pete to pay. But most people sensed that Pete was someone who needed love, and they were happy to oblige.

*We're all on a journey,
and on that journey we hope
to discover and become
the best version of ourselves
we can possibly be.*

At every dinner, Pete made it a point to talk to me. I must admit I often felt uncomfortable and could easily have been rude to him. But Pete was a nice man who had watched me grow up. He deserved to be treated kindly and in a manner that showed he mattered. He often told me, “I remember your mama holding you when you were a baby.” His eyes sparkled when he said this. I always pretended it was the first time he'd said it. A few times he brought his mother with him, and it was clear that he was proud to introduce me as his friend.

LOVE ISN'T ALWAYS EASY

We have to love each other enough to avoid complacency, to expect the best from one another.

Loving someone may mean pushing her gently to realize her potential.

Mothers do this for their kids, and vice versa. As a teenager, I expected my mom to excuse my transgressions because I was growing up: “Hey, I’m the kid here. I’m supposed to make mistakes, and you’re supposed to forgive me. I know what I did wrong, so let’s move on.” I felt mothers should expect teenagers to be moody and irrational. I wanted Mom to be caring and calm in the face of my tantrums. When she wasn’t, I thought there was something wrong with her. I thought she didn’t love me enough.

But later, when I actually considered where my mom was in her life, I reevaluated my feelings. She was a widow raising two teenagers. As she continued to grieve for my father, the list of people she could depend on got shorter and shorter. Philip and I, the two people she loved most in the world, weren’t always there for her. Mom was growing up, too. Like all parents, she was learning to parent as she went along. Expecting her always to do the right thing or react a certain way was unfair.

We never really reach an end in our negotiation of who we are and who we are becoming, and it’s natural for our loving relationships to become strained at times. But believing that a loved one should always know the right thing to say or do places an unfair burden on that person.

Although it is often said that no one can love you until you love yourself, I believe that it is God’s love and the love of others that make us the best people we can be. Welcoming, acknowledging, and believing that we deserve love helps us thrive.

PROFESSING OUR LOVE

In addition to surrounding ourselves with people who are examples to us (and trying to be good examples ourselves), we should tell loved ones what they mean to

us, and tell them often. Paul did so in his letters to early Christians. Even when he was writing from prison, his thoughts were on the suffering that other Christians might endure because of their beliefs. He assured his friends that they could trust in God’s love. Such assurances are vital to our relationships. In Philippians 1:3–4, Paul tells the people of Philippi, “Every time I think of you, I thank my God. And whenever I mention you in my prayers, it makes me happy” (Contemporary English Version). What a wonderful friend!

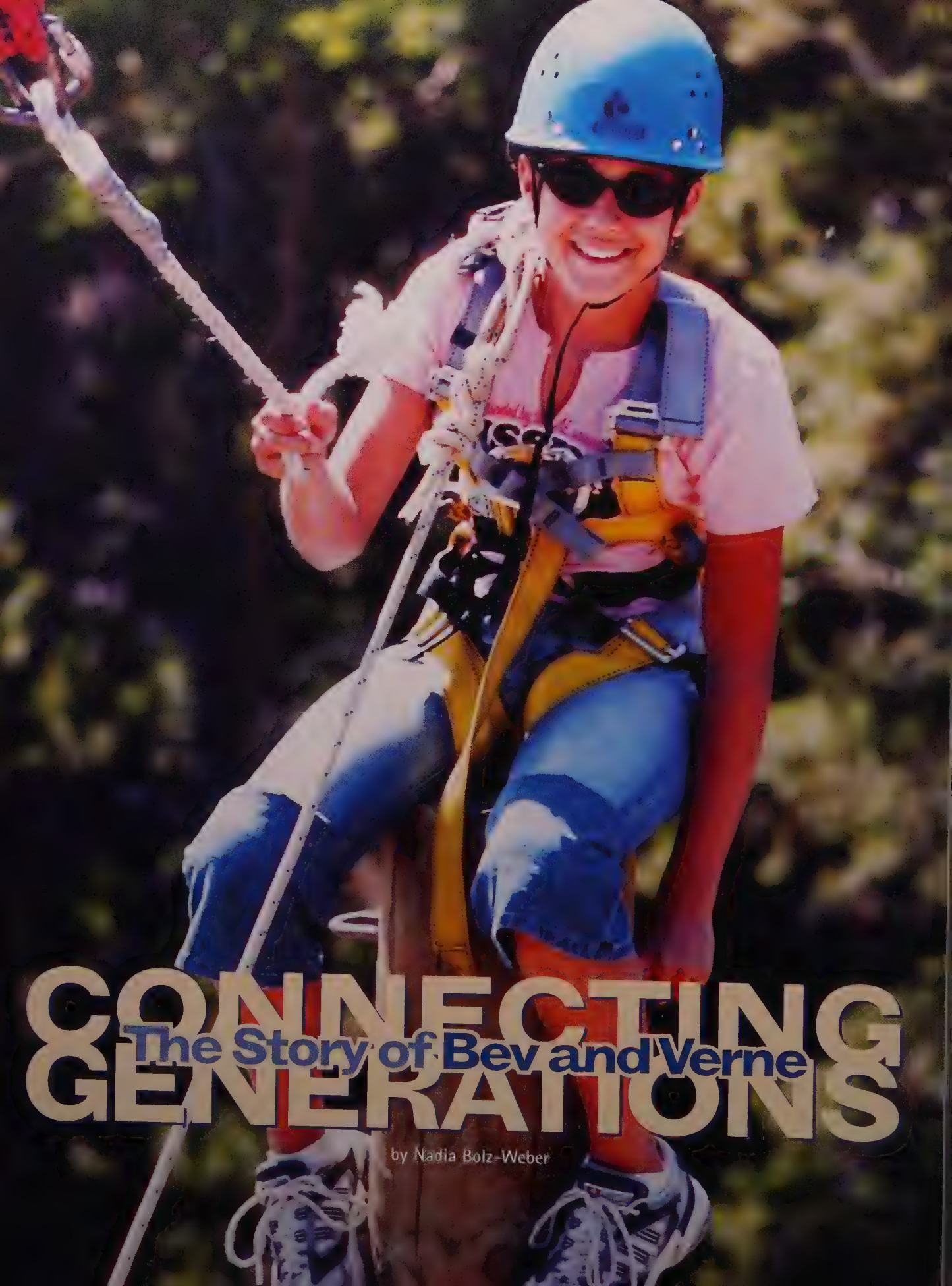
Professing love can be especially tough with the people we see every day, and things we might have done in years past to profess our love may no longer seem necessary. My husband knows I love him, so I don’t need to tell him every day, right?

Wrong. Failing to profess our love can create unintentional barriers. Part of what sustains our marriage is that my husband and I look each other in the eye and say “I love you” as often as we can. In saying it to him, I remind myself that this is someone I really care about, regardless of where his dirty socks are or how well he makes the bed. Whenever possible, we must look at our loved ones (these gifts in our lives), tell them that we love them, and tell them why we love them.

In his profession of love, Paul also issues a call to action. In a sense, Paul is saying, “Because I love you, because God loves you, you should strive for greatness.” If Paul could be so forthright, why can’t we?

How will we respond to Paul’s call? Will we declare our love to the companions on our journey? And will we join in action, holding each other accountable to the high calling that is ours because we have chosen to follow Jesus?

Karris Golden works at Wartburg College and writes the weekly column “On Faith” for the *Waterloo–Cedar Falls Courier*. She is a former president of the churchwide board of the Lutheran Youth Organization.



CONNECTING & GENERATIONS

The Story of Bev and Verne

by Nadia Bolz-Weber

One expects certain activities at a Lutheran summer camp: campfires, hiking, games, Bible studies, devotions, singing. But if you happen to be at Sky Ranch Lutheran Camp in the Colorado Rockies this summer, don't be surprised to see a dozen middle-school-age



Bev Verne

boys gathered around a white-haired, 70-something gal who is teaching them to knit. Look out the window of the main lodge, and you may see a group of kids watching a 79-year-old retired geologist while he tastes various rocks to see if they are "the sweet kind."

Last summer, Bev and Verne Berry spent three days of every week serving as knitting instructor, rock expert, and Grandma- and Grandpa-in-residence for the community of Christ that is Sky Ranch. "The camp originally wanted Verne because of his knowledge as a naturalist," said Bev, "but we wanted to stay together. So when they asked what my area of expertise was, I said, 'Hey, I'm a great knitter!'" Little did anyone realize that the knitting would catch on like wildfire.

At the start of camp season, Bev had 12 pairs of knitting needles. By the end of the summer, she needed 100 pairs. She would cast on the first stitches to give the neophytes a good start, and the kids did the rest, with lots of help and coaching from Bev. "It was wonderful to see that the kids who 'got it' right away were always so helpful to the kids who were taking longer to catch on. It was really sweet." The goal for each camper in her workshop was to knit a 6-inch square for a quilt to be sent to a Lutheran parish in Madagascar. Apparently the guideline was a bit flexible. "As an engineer," Verne said, "I was amazed at what was passing for a 6-inch square!" This summer, the plan is for campers to knit lap blankets for nursing home residents.

Bev insisted that, in addition to the campers in her workshops, all the counselors and adult sponsors learn the craft. "I wanted them to be interacting with

the kids," she added. During each weeklong session, the kids and counselors would walk around camp with their knitting in a back pocket, pulling it out whenever they had a minute. Bev noticed that "they would be chatting about important issues while their fingers were busy at the needles," which was, in a way, the whole point.

Bev noticed that "they would be chatting about important issues while their fingers were busy at the needles," which was, in a way, the whole point.

The geology lessons, though not quite as popular as the knitting classes, were successful in their own right. Verne Berry, a mild-mannered Quaker-cum-Lutheran, has always loved his fieldwork as a geologist. At the end of his Sky Ranch geol-

ogy classes, Verne would pull a fast one with candy rocks, telling the kids, "The Indians discovered that some rocks have a sweet taste." He had the kids bring him rocks to taste, making sure that they would find "a sweet one." After the initial wonder they realized he'd given them candy! "The amazing thing," he added with delight, "is that they never seemed to tip off the other kids about the joke."



“What happened was that we learned so much from them. Seeing these young people grow in their faith had a profound effect on us. They caused our faith to grow.”

Asked what surprised him about their experiences last summer, Verne smiled and said, “You can turn kids on to what you love if you just take the time to share yourself with them.” Another surprise? The number of rocks that kids brought to show “Gramps” at every meal! As for Bev, she said, “Initially Verne and I wanted to show kids that they don’t have to be afraid of us individuals with white hair. We’re not all disapproving old folks in nursing homes. What happened was that we learned so much from them. Seeing these young people grow in their faith had a profound effect on us. They caused our faith to grow.”

In the passage from 1 Thessalonians that is the text for this month’s Bible study, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy praise the Christians of Thessalonica for their community of faith. Being followers of Christ implies being in community. We see the power of community in the triune nature of God. But what

does it mean to be a Christian community? We are meant to be living examples to each other, serving as both teachers and students. Too often the concepts of mentorship, teaching, and discipleship in the church and in the broader community separate us into givers and receivers. Such stratified thinking limits our ideas of ourselves and of others, and we end up missing out on a fuller experience, one filled with surprise and wonder. This limited view can keep us from seeing the broader picture of what we have to offer and what we might learn from someone else.

At some fundamental level, perhaps we are meant to be surprised by one another, as Paul was by the faithful, wholehearted Christians in Thessalonica. Paul tells them in his letter that they are preaching the gospel in the way they live. Think of how surprised the campers and staff of Sky Ranch were to be learning from the skills and wisdom of a couple in their seventies. Think of how surprised Bev and Verne Berry were to be ministered to by middle-school kids. Think of what surprise of faith we might be missing in our own lives.

Gracious Triune God, open our eyes to the surprises of faith that surround us in the community of your children. Amen

Nadia Bolz-Weber is a wife, mother of two, student of sociology, and member of Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Longmont, Colo.

Making the LWT Bible Study Work for You!

by Deborah Bogaert

HERE ARE SOME TIPS FOR GETTING THE MOST OUT OF YOUR TIME TOGETHER IN BIBLE STUDY:

1. Decide together how much you are going to prepare ahead. It's frustrating to prepare meticulously and then discover that most others have not, resulting in the need to spend more time reading biblical texts and the material between the questions. The reverse is equally frustrating; keeping up with the conversation will be challenging. So decide together on your approach and encourage everyone to stick to it! Then be flexible; you can always change course later.

Each session is designed to take about an hour (minus the Go Deeper sections) for a group that has done some preparation beforehand. If you all agree that you are not going to do much preparation in advance, expect that finishing the session in its entirety will take more time.

2. Decide together what day, place, and time are best for everyone and how long you are going to meet. At your first meeting, ask whether everyone can or wants to continue with what has been established—sometimes for years! People's routines and obligations change. Some folks might love to join you, but the current meeting time doesn't work for them.

Is your group continually frustrated by not finishing or having to move too quickly through the sessions? Maybe you should set aside an hour and a half, or even two hours, with a break in the middle for coffee and dessert. You may be surprised at the group's willingness to spend a little more time on the study if the result is greater satisfaction.

3. Customize! Study leaders should consider whether it is realistic for their group to get through all the material within the scheduled time. Guide the discussion so that there is sufficient time for those questions that you know will hold greater interest for your group.

Feel free to tailor the study so that your group's needs are met. The primary goals of the study are to help you become better acquainted with Paul's earliest letters and to deepen your understanding of Paul's world. These goals can be met even if you do not consider all the questions offered. Try, however, to get to the last section of each session, which is intended to draw together the session's main points. It's better to skip middle sections than not reach the end.

4. Consider how to use the Go Deeper sections—or not. These optional sections provide additional discussion opportunities if you have the time and the desire. You may want to substitute one of these for a question or two.

Do a few people have interest in the Go Deeper portions? Perhaps they can linger a bit longer, go out and discuss them further over coffee, or hold an on-line or e-mail discussion. Such flexibility is built into the study.

5. You need not discuss the material in the sidebars. The sidebars provide additional background and other interesting information, but their contents need not be covered in your study time. Read this material at your leisure.

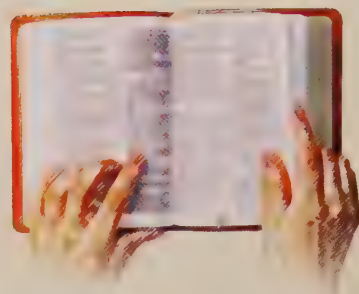
We hope you enjoy the *I Thank God for You!* study. As always, we would love to hear how the study is going in your group; see the last page for information on contacting us.

Deborah Bogaert is director for communication for Women of the ELCA and a contributing editor for *Lutheran Woman Today*.

Session 1

Always Mentioning You in Our Prayers

by Robin Mattison



Study Text

1 Thessalonians 1:1–10

Theme Verse

“We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 1:2–3).

Overview of 1 Thessalonians

This session introduces you to the earliest document in the New Testament, a letter written by Paul, along with Silvanus and Timothy. This affectionate letter was written around A.D. 41 to the assembly of Gentile Christians in the port city of Thessalonica in the province of Macedonia (now Greece). We will study this letter in order to better understand the startling differences that emerged in Paul’s faith after he came to believe in Jesus Christ and saw that God was reconciling the world through Christ. What changed for Paul were

- how he related to God
- his understanding of God’s blessings
- what he recognized as evils afflicting people
- his understanding of how people come to faith
- his understanding of how people’s faith goes out to others
- how urgent God’s message in Christ is

All these changes in Paul’s faith led him to start a mission to an unexpected audience: the Gentiles. Since almost all of us are Gentiles—non-Jews who have never observed the Law of Moses—we owe our faith to Paul.

In This Session

In this session we will learn how, by the power of God, Paul, a Jew by birth, became a proclaimer of the good news with such authority that Gentiles became Christians. In particular, we will look at two characteristics of Paul’s new faith: (1) his certainty that God intervenes directly in the present lives of every human being, and (2) his certainty that Jesus’ experience of obedience—rejoicing in suffering, dying, and rising—would also be the experience of believers, and that through them, still more people would come to faith.¹

Opening

The three earliest letters of Paul—1 Thessalonians, Philemon, and Philippians—all begin with a similar prayer of thanksgiving. Paul reports to these assemblies of believers that he is always and constantly giving thanks to God for them (1 Thessalonians 1:2–3; Philemon 4–6; Philippians 1:3–5). This is no casual statement. When Paul said, “I thank God for you,” he was letting the believers know that he saw God’s good news presently active in *them!* Paul was confident that

God had empowered them with such gifts that they were examples of works of faith, labors of love, and steadfastness of hope under suffering—as Christ their Lord had been before them (1 Thessalonians 1:1–3, 6).

Let us begin with the prayer that Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy prayed for the Thessalonians. Read aloud together the theme verse for this session. Then let each person turn to the person on her left and say, “I thank God for *you!*” If you know the person next to you, you might want to add another part of Paul’s prayer: “for your work of faith,” “for your labor of love,” “for your steadfastness of hope.” Continue until all are saying to each other, “I thank God for *you!*”

1. What was it like to thank God for someone you may or may not know very well? What was it like to be the recipient of such thanks? Is it harder to say “I thank God for you” than to say “I thank you”? Why?

Paul: The Background Story

Before Paul became a Christian, he was one of the best of the Pharisees, a teaching sect of Judaism (Philippians 3:5). Paul knew the Jewish Law forward and backward (Galatians 1:14), and he honored God regularly and faithfully. So why did he violently persecute Jews who experienced Jesus as a confirmation of their faith in God (Galatians 1:13)? Because Paul heard them proclaim that a man he believed was a criminal—Jesus—was the anointed one, the Messiah, the Christ. Paul could not accept that God would raise up a man who was clearly cursed according to the Law handed down by Moses: “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree” (Deuteronomy 21:23; Galatians 3:13).

What overturned Paul’s certainty? It was the way the Holy Spirit empowered those Paul persecuted. These Jews praised God and rejoiced in Jesus as the chosen one of God even as they suffered at Paul’s hand.

God finally converted Paul by confronting his conviction that God had acted only in the past, in the handing down of the Law. Paul had to reconsider: What if God was acting now, to show Pharisees like him that they had made an idol of the Law and through their idolatry had perverted the very good gift of the Law? What if these Christ-following Jews were eagerly proclaiming what God was up to now? If God was active in the present, and part of that activity was raising Jesus from the dead, then that proved that Jesus was not a criminal!

It followed that God must also then be reconciling Gentiles to God, even if they didn’t have the Law. Much to Paul’s own surprise, his conversion led him out on a mission to the Gentiles.

2. Have you ever had or witnessed a turn-around (conversion) experience like Paul’s—going from thinking that someone or some group of believers was not acting as God would want them to act to recognizing them as agents of God’s word? (Some historical figures who might be examples are Martin Luther, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela.) What were the effects of this change?

Paul’s Charismatic Faith

3. Read through 1 Thessalonians 1:1–10, looking for the following in your Bible’s margins or footnotes:

- Are there any references to the Law (the Torah—the first five books of Moses)?
- Are there any references to the reign of David or the rule of the kings of Israel?
- Are there any references to the Psalms, Proverbs, or the Prophets?
- What does this suggest to you about the content of Paul’s preaching to the Thessalonians?

PAUL'S JOURNEYS OF FAITH (A.D. 33–55)

Paul's letters do not give us an exact chronology of his travels, but we can piece together certain significant events and their location. As you read the summary in the next three paragraphs, you might look on the map for each of the places Paul visited and highlight and number them in order.

Paul twice spoke of his conversion as an experience he wasn't sure whether to call "in the body" or "out of the body" (2 Corinthians 12:2). The power of this experience sent him off to **Arabia** and to **Damascus** in **Syria** for three years (Galatians 1:15–17). He then went to **Jerusalem** because a revelation from God told him that he should visit those who headed the assembly of believers there—James, Peter, and John (Galatians 1:17–19). While he was there, the leaders affirmed that Paul had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised (the Gentiles) in the same way that Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (the Jews).

Paul then proclaimed the gospel in **Syria** and in the regions of



Cilicia and **Galatia** in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). By A.D. 38, Paul had begun a mission in **Achaia** and **Macedonia** (the northeastern corner of modern Greece) with Silvanus and Timothy. He traveled there by boat across the **Aegean Sea**, the portion of the **Mediterranean Sea** between Greece and Turkey, and then on a Roman road, the **Via Egnatia**. He began his proclamation in **Philippi**, a famous city of many gods. Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy were able to gather an assembly of Christian believers, but not without experiencing persecution.

At some point, Paul and his companions moved on to **Thessalonica**, the Roman

regional headquarters and capital of the province of Macedonia, to start a new witness. As Paul wrote in Romans 15:20, he liked to begin missions in places where no one had brought the good news before. Citizens of Thessalonica worshiped the pantheon of Greek gods as well as the cult of the emperor. The mission was successful in this port city, but again Paul outraged some who worshiped idols. Paul stayed there for some time, working by day with his hands as his mission developed (1 Thessalonians 2:9). At some point, he moved on to **Athens**. By A.D. 41, he was in **Corinth** beginning a mission. From Corinth, he wrote 1 Thessalonians.

The letter we are reading is Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, but it was not his first actual contact with them. He had called the Thessalonians into a Christian assembly about a year before; conversions had already come about. However, no part of the letter suggests that the Old Testament played any role in these conversions. Paul focused his message to the Thessalonians on God's power in their present Gentile experience and in their future with Christ. God had challenged them and chosen them just as they were.

The term for the kind of faith Paul proclaims here is *charismatic* faith—faith grounded in the confidence that God's primary way of communicating with people is through direct intervention in their lives. Moreover, all who received the word and the power from Paul's proclamation also received the authority to proclaim, because the power to proclaim came from their experience of God.

Charismatic faith is different from faith dependent on Scripture, which Paul knew from his Jewish upbringing. In that kind of faith, a believer's authority (like Paul's) comes from learning, and so not everyone has the same authority to proclaim. The priests in Jerusalem had yet another kind of faith. Their authority was institutional and depended on continuity with the traditions of the past. In that setting, not everyone could be a religious leader. The tradition reserved leadership roles for people of certain lineage, gender, health status, or social situation.

4. How would Paul's model of charismatic faith be an advantage to women and slaves in Thessalonica? How might it be an advantage in your culture?

Not in Word Only

5. Read 1 Thessalonians 1:4–5. In what ways did the gospel come to the Thessalonians? Look for four characteristics. Is this how the good news came to you?

What may be surprising is that a word of proclamation alone was not enough for the Gentile Thessalonians. You might have thought that amazing words would have appealed to them, since the Greco-Roman culture valued fine rhetoric. However, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy wanted the Thessalonians to have real confidence in God, not simply to be amazed. What was necessary for them to become believers was that the gospel be proclaimed in power, so that the Thessalonians would recognize it as a divine intervention (1 Thessalonians 1:4–5).

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy couldn't simply stand in the marketplace and recite the history of God with Israel, for there was not a word of Scripture that was familiar to the Thessalonians. That kind of proclamation would have brought forth no resonant memory, no emotional connection, no conviction that this news was for *them*.

Paul chose to follow God's lead by putting the good news in the language of the Thessalonians, in Greek. He also shaped his proclamation in a way that took seriously how the Thessalonians already understood divine power. Because Paul honored these dimensions of the Thessalonians' culture and experience, the Thessalonians could understand that the God he proclaimed was challenging and choosing *them*, snatching *them* from evil, and offering *them* salvation from the wrath to come.

6. Many believers have experienced God in a defining moment, a moment when the proclamation and the power came together in a new way.

Have you had such an experience? How much of the continuing power of that moment depends on your remembering the emotions you felt at the time as well as the words you heard?

Paul's Typological Faith: The Virtue of Imitation

7. Read 1 Thessalonians 1:6. Paul says, “you became imitators of us and of the Lord.” Some might be uncomfortable with that model of being faithful. Why? What do you think of imitation?

Paul believed that Jesus, who died and was raised by God, was in heaven (1:10). If the Gentiles were going to see the good news as well as hear it, they had to encounter rejoicing in the midst of dying and rising, which is what Jesus had done. Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy needed to *be* Christ for them after Jesus' death and resurrection.

It may seem preposterous that Paul didn't speak of the daily life of Christ as a model for the Thessalonians' lives. Why didn't Paul draw on the Gospels, with their bounty of stories and words of Jesus? Wouldn't the Thessalonians find models for their lives in Christ from them? Actually, no—we have the Gospels, but Paul did not. They were not written down until after his letters.

How then could potential believers have a model for a life of faith? By having the same experiences as Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy. They had experienced the same things Jesus had: receiving God's word with joy, obediently proclaiming God's new actions, rejoicing in God, and hoping in the resurrection despite suffering instigated by people from their own country (1:6; 2:14–16).

This model of imitation is the second major characteristic of Paul's faith. It is called *typological* faith. That is, the things that Jesus experienced—his obedi-

ence to God, his being persecuted and dying, and his rising—are part of Jesus' type, which becomes a pattern for believers to imitate. They too shall experience conversion, then obedience, then persecution, then dying, then rising by the power of God.

Becoming an Example for Others

The Thessalonians rejoiced in receiving the Spirit even during the persecution that came upon them. Consequently, they became examples to believers in Macedonia and Achaia, as well as to the nonbelievers who persecuted them.

The Macedonians and Achaians could now imitate the Thessalonians in the same way that the Thessalonians had imitated Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, just as Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy had imitated the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul could not have been happier. The imitators had become examples for others (1:6–7), and in turn, these could become models for still others (1:8–9).

Go Deeper

Review 1 Thessalonians 1:6–10. What was the content of the first testimony of the Thessalonians as reported by the Macedonians and the Achaians? Describe what the Thessalonians believed about the following:

- God and how God works
- Jesus Christ and his role in relation to God
- The evil that has been overcome by believers under the power of God's action
- Their vocation as believers until Jesus returns

Is this the understanding of faith that you have? Why or why not? What would you tell a nonbeliever is your basic belief about God and God's work, Jesus and his present role, the evil that Christians have overcome with God's help, and your vocation until Christ returns?

WRITING A CHRISTIAN EPISTLE

Paul began his letters by writing at the top his name and that of his companions. Think of it as akin to a heading on church stationery: "Paul and his mission staff." Then he identified the intended recipients of the letter: "To the assembly of those called forth in Thessalonica by God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."²

Family members would often be the recipients of ancient letters, just as today, but Paul was writing to a different kind of family. He

used the common Greek word for assembly, *ekklesia*, to describe the recipients of his letter. Your Bible translates *ekklesia* as "church," a word that modern Christians often use to refer to buildings and

Paul chose the word *ekklesia* because of its root meaning in the verb *ekkale*, "I call forth."

denominations. Paul, however, is not referring to an institution or a building. Christians were not allowed to own religious property, so there was no official building or institutional headquarters

where they met. The believers' assemblies were possible only because generous hosts in the congregation offered their homes as meeting places. Once the gathering was over, the meeting place became someone's home again.

Paul chose the word *ekklesia* because of its root meaning in the verb *ekkale*, "I call forth." Paul also changed the usual form of greeting in his letters. He wrote, "Grace to you and peace." He translated the Jewish greeting *shalom* (peace) and added the word that marks Paul's signature experience with God: *grace*.

Good News in 10 Verses

Paul always made the first verses of his letters serve as a summary for the whole letter. The rest of the letter continues to make few references to Scripture, to emphasize how divine power intercedes in the Thessalonians' lives, and to emphasize right action for believers as imitators of Paul.

The repetition of these themes in the next portion of the letter confirms what we have seen in these verses. First, Paul's faith is fundamentally *charismatic*—it focuses on the present interventions of God in believers' lives through revelation and wonders that point to God's intervention in raising his son from the dead. Second, Paul's faith is *typological*—believers need models in their own culture that show the same pattern of obedience and rejoicing in God in the face of persecution that Jesus displayed.

8. Take a letter! Imagine that you are an Achaian or a Macedonian, an imitator of the Thessalonian Christians. Compose a greeting and a prayer of thanksgiving for an assembly of believers in yet another city. They are new converts, and you are their elders in the good news who have brought them the gospel. How would you build them up in the present reality of their faith amid persecution or social unrest? What do you want to tell them about how they can still demonstrate the power of God and imitate Christ?

Closing

Conclude with prayers for participants in the pattern of the thanksgiving at the beginning of Paul's letter.

IMITATION AT ITS BEST

People in the first century lived under the pressure of the past much more than we do. For example, all education was based on memorization. Little boys would memorize the great speeches of senators and philosophers by copying their words repeatedly. They would

learn good rhetorical style from the valued handbooks of their elders. Around the age of 12, they were permitted to compose a small speech of their own, commit it to memory, and deliver it in the best style possible. The speech would be judged by how closely it followed the values and rhetoric of past speakers and philosophers. Individuality or

novelty was not rewarded, for the best was already in the past. If students did not imitate past speakers properly, they would be marked as uncivilized, as barbarians. Therefore, when Paul said, "you imitated us and the Lord," he was commending them highly, both for the value of imitation and for their choice of whom to imitate.

this month's QUESTION

Go to www.elca.org/wo/lwt to enter your response.
(Results will appear in the January/February 2004 issue.)

Most of my closest friends are . . .

- A. older than I am.
- B. younger than I am.
- C. about my same age.
- D. of all different ages.

Results from Question of the Month

(April 2003)

Q: How many times a month do you write a letter?

Here's what
you said:



Once or twice
16.2%



Three times or more
25.7%



Zero—I just use e-mail now
40.5%



Zero—I just call
17.6%

Looking Ahead

In the next session, we will study the third characteristic of Paul's faith, his focus on Christ at the end of time—that is, his *eschatology*. We will also look at how Paul's view of Christ as the normative (foundational) type for believers changes Paul's views of religious leadership. Study text: 1 Thessalonians 2:1–3:13.

The Rev. Dr. Robin Mattison is associate professor of New Testament and Greek at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia.

Notes

1. Daniel Patte, *Paul's Faith and the Power of the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 233–40. The three dimensions of Paul's faith (charismatic, typological, and eschatological) discussed in this Bible study represent original work of Patte's.

2. My translation. See Abraham Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 99.

LWT SHARES NEWS OF HONORS

Dear Readers,

Lutheran Woman Today magazine is a member of two national organizations: the Associated Church Press (ACP) and the Religion Communicators Council (RCC). ACP is a group of more than 200 Christian publications, Web sites, news services, and individual communicators. RCC is an interfaith association of more than 600 religion communicators working in print and electronic communication, marketing, and public relations. Every spring, these organizations gather to provide professional development opportunities and to honor the best work of their members during the prior year.

Lutheran Woman Today was honored with 16 awards from these two national organizations this past April. It is with great pride that we share news of these awards with you!

Nancy Goldberger, editor

Lutheran Woman Today

2002 AWARDS FROM ASSOCIATED CHURCH PRESS AND RELIGION COMMUNICATORS COUNCIL

Best in Class

Second place

Special Interest Magazine ACP

Awards of Excellence

(by category)

Bible Study

*"Grace upon Grace: A Study
of the Gospel of John"*

by Mary Hinkle

Sept 2002–May 2003 ACP

Writing for Periodicals

*"God and Chaos,
Faith and Healing"*

by Herbert W. Chilstrom

Sept 2002 RCC

Graphic Design, Art,

and Photography

September 2002 issue

designed by On Track

Visual Communications RCC

Feature Article

Special Interest Magazine

"Forgiving"

by Jeanne Bishop

Jan/Feb 2002 ACP

Magazine Design, Spread

"Transforming Mud"

designed by On Track

Visual Communications

Sept 2002 ACP

Awards of Merit

Media Review Section

Bookmarks

by Linda Post Bushkofsky

and Karen Ball

May and Dec 2002 ACP

Writing for Periodicals

"Forgiving"

by Jeanne Bishop

Jan/Feb 2002 RCC

Honorable Mentions

Magazine Theme

Life's Stages and Spirituality

Nancy Goldberger and

Deb Bogaert, editors

June 2002 ACP

Interview

"Forgotten Sisters in Palestine"
interview with Viola Raheb

by Nancy Goldberger

and Deb Bogaert

Jan/Feb 2002 ACP

Magazine Department

Mothering Seasons

by Nancy Goldberger,

Kirsi Stjerna, and

Jennifer Grant Haworth

Apr, Oct, and Nov 2002 ACP

Most Personally Useful Article

*"Nine Ways to Support
the Bereaved"*

by June Cerza Kolf

March 2002 ACP

Professional Resource

*"The Blessing of the Animals:
All Creatures Great and Small"*

by Linda Witte Henke

October 2002 ACP

Illustration

*"Heeding God's Call and
Balancing Family"*

illustration by On Track

Visual Communications

July/Aug 2002 ACP

Magazine Photography

*"It's Your Birthday: Don't Let
Your Milestone be a Millstone"*

photography by On Track

Visual Communications

June 2002 ACP

Convention Coverage

Triennial Times, daily cover-
age of Women of the ELCA's

Fifth Triennial Gathering

July 2002 ACP



CIRCLES OF LIFE

by Judy Clements

Bible Study Fosters Connectedness

THEY SIT IN A CIRCLE. SOME IN THEIR WHEELCHAIRS AND SOME WITH THEIR WALKERS. Some sing from the hymnbook, while those who can no longer read smile as the familiar old songs tug at their memories. Different backgrounds and different abilities come together each month at Trinity Lutheran Home in Aiken, South Carolina, for a Bible study led by Beth Barkhau, diaconal minister at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Aiken.

Today the Bible study, based on the *LWT* study for March, focuses on Jesus' ministry of welcome. A dozen residents and four St. Paul Women of the ELCA members gather in the activity room. Barkhau rubs fragrant lotion on everyone's hands and then reads the study texts from John 13, in which Jesus washes the feet of his disciples, and John 12, in which Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, anoints Jesus' feet with perfumed ointment. Everyone follows along in the special study guides in enlarged type prepared by member Sue Brady. Barkhau arranges a shawl and a large bowl of African design to serve as focal points. She asks us to feel and smell the lotion, to remember a time when we were made to feel welcome.

This Bible study began three years ago when members of St. Paul Women of the ELCA asked Barkhau to help them form a connection with the residents of Trinity Lutheran Home. A Bible study team was formed.

Women of the ELCA members visit to play the piano, sing, read Bible verses, and converse with their new friends at Trinity.

Although the Bible studies are based on those in *LWT*, some adaptations are made. "We always use focal points like art objects, and I try to weave in many modes of sensory learning," said Barkhau. "We sing, listen to guest speakers, and have prayer and study time. Sometimes someone brings a pet. The residents enjoy *LWT*, and members often share their copies. The religious affiliation of the Trinity residents mirrors that of the Aiken community. Baptists, Presbyterians, Catholics, and Methodists, as well as Lutherans come to the group, so the Bible study is ecumenical."

Over the course of the group's meetings, adjustments have been made when necessary. At first the group used tables and chairs, but residents had difficulty maneuvering their wheelchairs and walkers.

Sitting in a circle makes navigation easier and just feels friendlier.

At 95, Arnie Sheppard is the oldest resident in the group. Sheppard says you're never too old to learn. "Anytime we can learn about God, that's a good thing. We never know enough. I've been going to church all my life, and this group is like a family to me."

Grace DuBose, a member of St. Thaddeus Episcopal Church, was one of the first residents to join the class. "My husband was in the military, so we've lived everywhere. This class has triggered so many memories. I love this class—it's the best!"

The class benefits the Women of the ELCA participants, too. "This is my Sunday school class," said Margaret Newman. Severe arthritis makes it hard for her to sit through both Sunday school and a worship service on the same day.

The Women of the ELCA members' commitment to the women of Trinity also resulted in a buddy program, which pairs a member with a Trinity resident. Trinity offers many activities for residents, and most have supportive families, but the buddy program provides an additional opportunity for one-on-one relationships. Buddies attend Barkhau's Bible study and social events.

Events strengthen friendships. "Trinity is better because of the involvement of our wonderful volunteers," says Trinity's administrator, Connie Henrich. "No group is more devoted to our residents or more appreciated by them than the St. Paul Women of the ELCA group."

Beth Barkhau sees the St. Paul-Trinity connections as another example of the ministry of dedicated volunteers. "One of the greatest joys of serving with the people at St. Paul has been the diaconal connection between St. Paul and Trinity Lutheran Home. The Bible study could not take place without the desire and commitment of our congregation. The women who help me lead the Bible study have been empowered to use their spiritual gifts to the point where now they are inviting others into the leadership circle and creating new small-group ministries. What a gift of the Spirit it is to see their passion and joy in service. I thank God each time I walk with them!"

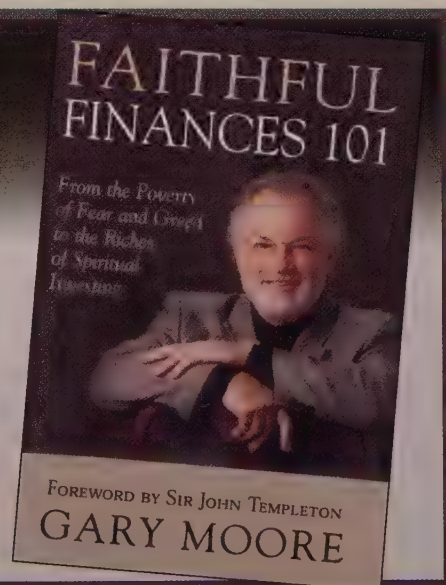
Judy Clements is a member of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Aiken, S.C. She is a member of the choir and secretary of the church council. She and her husband Jerry have two grown children.

How to use Scripture to create a more abundant life

"In today's culture it is especially important that we hear and heed Gary's words if the Christian ethic of stewardship is not to lose the battle to the competing theology of materialism." —Dick Towner, Executive Director, Good Sense Stewardship Movement, Willow Creek Association

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SEWING

by Doris Strieter

FOR SUSTENANCE



Women from the Karonga parish receive sewing lessons at the ELCM offices in Lilongwe, Malawi.

When Women of the ELCA in the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin heard that women in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malawi (ELCM) needed sewing machines, they listened with their hearts and immediately responded. A synodical women's committee organized the Sewing for Sustenance project with the goal of raising money to purchase treadle sewing machines, fabric, thread, and other essentials. By the time the project ended several months later, over \$26,000 had been collected and sent to the ELCM.

In a country that is 90 percent rural and that ranks among the world's least developed nations, a treadle sewing machine is truly a gift of hope, because it means that Malawi women not only can sew clothing for themselves and their families but also can generate income for food, rent, tuition, schoolbooks, and uniforms.

The goal of the project is to provide sewing supplies and at least one sewing machine for each of the Malawi church's 38 parishes, each of which consists of 6-18 preaching points and congregations. According to ELCM bishop Joseph Bvumbwe, the treadle machines, which are purchased in Malawi, cost about \$250 apiece. Without the machines, women in rural areas where there is no electricity must hand-sew the family's clothing.

Many members of the ELCM, which is linked with the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin through the ELCA's companion-synod program, live in poverty compounded by the effects of HIV/AIDS. The church has recognized the varied roles of women in the Malawi culture and has sought ways to assist them in their struggle with poverty. It continues to promote economic development, especially for women, while emphasizing the importance of spiritual growth among its members.

Among the many programs for women supported by the church are classes in cooking, nutrition, knitting,

leading Bible study and worship, and evangelism. Other classes instruct girls in their spiritual growth. Women from parishes all over Malawi are brought to the church headquarters for three weeks of training. When they return home, they share what they have learned with other women and their children. According to Bishop Bvumbwe, "When you teach women, you teach society."

When women are empowered, everyone benefits—not only our sisters in Malawi, but the people in their companion synods in this country as well. "My heart is filled to overflowing with joy," says Kathy Wohlers, who has traveled in Malawi and who helped organize the Sewing for Sustenance project. "The people of Malawi live in my heart. I carry them with me each and every day. Our brothers and sisters in Christ there, especially our sisters and all of the children, have become a part of me."

We cannot accept contributions to this sewing project because it is an independent project of the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin. To support other projects that empower women around the world, contact Doris Strieter, associate for programs, at 800-638-3522, ext. 2465, for information on the Women of the ELCA Grants Program.



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Congratulations to 26 ELCA Women!

by Faith L. Fretheim

MOBILIZING WOMEN TO ACT BOLDLY ON THEIR FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST MEANS EQUIPPING WOMEN FOR MINISTRY, AND THAT'S WHAT THE WOMEN OF THE ELCA SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM IS ALL ABOUT. PLEASE JOIN US IN CONGRATULATING THIS YEAR'S 26 RECIPIENTS WHO SHARE \$28,600 IN AWARDS.

Mary Cisar, associate professor and assistant vice-president for academic affairs at St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota, received the Schneider Academic Leadership Scholarship.

Judith Bangsund and Mary Bowman, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, and Shirley Ross-Jones, Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio, received Chilstrom Scholarships. All three women are in their final year at seminary and will be ordained into the ELCA.

Some of our funds for laywomen have a specific purpose. Estelline Beamon, Savannah, Georgia, and Heather Feltman, Irmo, South Carolina, received the Arne Scholarship for women interested in reaching the top of their field as administrators.

The Drinkall Franke/Seeley Knudstrup Fund assists mature ELCA laywomen who are preparing for an occupation in Christian service through graduate study. Jo Gast from Beltrami, Minnesota, received this scholarship.

A third scholarship with a specific purpose comes from the combined Belmer, Prince, Kahler, Vickers/Raup, and Wettstein Funds. This scholarship is for women studying to work in ELCA projects abroad. Beth Elness-Hanson is this year's recipient.

The Amelia Kemp Scholarship assists mature ELCA women of color in undergraduate, graduate, professional, or vocational courses of study. This year's recipients are Sonya Dalton, Houston, Texas; Carolyn Wilson, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Deanna Riley-Williams, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Our general scholarships to assist laywomen in undergraduate, graduate, professional, or vocational courses of study come from the Cronk Memorial, First Triennial Board, General, Mehring, Paepke, Piero/Wade/Wade, and Edwin and Edna Robeck Funds. The 2003–2004 recipients are Shannon Finger, Helenville, Wisconsin; Maria Garza, Maplewood, Minnesota; Shelly-Rae Pehler, Donahue, Iowa; Ann Abplanalp, Davenport, Iowa; Carol Halterman, Westlake, Ohio; Anita Hardy, Shell Rock, Iowa; Yvonne Kulma, Painesville, Ohio; Sally Hagy, Denver, Pennsylvania; Colleen Davidson, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania; Dawn Davis, Belvidere, Illinois; Gwen Lutz, Wyoming, Minnesota; June Nabers, Basye, Virginia; Linda Thomas, Oak Park, Illinois; Laura Reed, San Luis Obispo, California; and Sarah Verke, Berkeley, California. These women are pursuing studies in a broad range of fields.

God's blessings to all, and our thanks to Women of the ELCA individuals, circles, and others who send contributions to the above funds to equip ELCA women for ministry.

Faith L. Fretheim is associate for programs, Women of the ELCA.



GRACE NOTES

Skillfully Focusing on Gifts

by Linda Post Bushkofsky

A POPULAR BUSINESS MAXIM TELLS US, "WORK SMARTER, NOT HARDER." ONE OF THE WAYS THAT WE IN THE CHURCH CAN WORK SMARTER, NOT HARDER, IS TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN OUR GIFTS AND OUR SKILLS AND TO FOCUS ON USING OUR GIFTS.

In her book *Hearing with the Heart*, Debra Farrington offers helpful distinctions between gifts and skills. "Gifts are those abilities," Farrington writes, "that seem to arise from within you without any training or conscious development. Perhaps they are even inborn. Using them energizes us, feeds us at some deep level." By contrast, skills "are learned and deliberately developed." We may excel at certain skills, but using them doesn't bring the same joy, creativity, and energy that come when we use our gifts. In fact, we may be angry, bored, or fatigued, Farrington points out, when using just our skills.

It has taken me a long time to distinguish between gifts and skills in my own life. I trained to be a lawyer and excelled in my studies. I practiced law and taught for eight years, but my work didn't bring me joy, call on my creativity, or energize me. I was good at what I did, but the work was draining. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was using my skills, not my gifts, in practicing law. When I began working for the church 10 years ago, I began using my gifts of analysis, strategic thinking, creativity, and nurturing in a way that brought me great joy. The difference in how I approached my working hours was remarkable.

To use our gifts is to follow God's call. As we move into the second year of our triennium and focus

on the theme "Listen, God Is Calling," spend some time in your unit in discernment. Are you and the women of your unit using your gifts? Perhaps you need to start by figuring out what gifts each of you possesses. Put aside false modesty and work together in your unit to discern the gifts within each of you. Then consider how you spend your days. Does your work-for-pay make use of these gifts? Do you use your gifts when volunteering or when spending time with family or friends? Are your days filled with activities that you are skilled at doing but that bring you no joy?

You may want to read Farrington's book, *Hearing with the Heart*. Chapters 3–6 offer tools for discernment, and the epilogue includes a prayer service for discernment that can be used by an individual or a group.

As you plan the year ahead for your unit, focus on using the gifts people possess. The year holds plenty of opportunities for service and leadership. Match people's gifts with the service or project and watch what unfolds. Leadership responsibilities are too often lodged in one or two people, sometimes for many years. It may be that these women are skilled at what they are doing, but they may not necessarily be gifted in these areas. Many others in the unit or congregation surely have been given a variety of gifts that, when allowed to flourish, will greatly serve the unit as together you mobilize women to act boldly on their faith in Jesus Christ.

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director, Women of the ELCA.



A M E N !

Abundantly Grateful

by Catherine Malotky

WHY IS IT SO HARD TO STAY FOCUSED ON WHAT I HAVE AND SO EASY TO BE PREOCCUPIED WITH WHAT I DO NOT HAVE? I RECEIVED WISE ADVICE ONCE: OFFER "GRATEFULS" DAILY. REVIEW THE DAY JUST PAST, AND NOTICE, WITH INTENTION, THE ABUNDANCE IT HELD. HOW MUCH MORE CLEARLY I COULD SEE MY ABUNDANT RICHES, GOD, IF ONLY I COULD REMEMBER TO FRAME ALL THAT IS AROUND ME AS YOUR GIFT TO ME! I WOULD BE A BETTER CHRISTIAN, MORE TRUSTING IN YOUR PROMISES, MORE HOPEFUL, JOYOUS, AND CONTENT.

Yet these yearnings remain. Might my discontent, my restlessness, my impatience be a gift from you as well?

Perhaps, dear God who loves me, these feelings can teach me something about your abundance. Perhaps when I feel selfish, it is a clue that I have not nourished myself but have given far too much away without tending the well from which it is given. Perhaps when I feel dissatisfied with how I live, it is a clue that I need to claim that part of myself that values beauty and peace—both God-given wonders. Perhaps when I am angry that others seem to have so much and I so little, it is a clue that injustice is not good for the human spirit, mine or anyone else's.

How would I live faithfully with these longings if I saw them indeed as clues from your Spirit to mine? Might I hear you calling me to act justly? To honor and cultivate the beauty you have painted all around me? To love myself and others?

Then my words of gratitude might include thanks

for the restless yearnings that disrupt me, in addition to those things that are more directly life-giving. Then I could say thanks for those with whom I differ, because they teach me about the broadness of life and what is important to me. They are a part of your mirror to me, to help me learn about the wideness of your love for all. Then I could say thanks for those whose resources give them unwarranted privilege, because they teach me to work for justice for myself and for all those who suffer because of others' unwarranted privilege (even my own privilege). Might this changed attitude humble me to work for good rather than churn in judgment? Might it release me from a martyred spirit? What a gift that would be! Then I might see more clearly how you have chosen me—*all* of me—to be your child. Might I then rejoice more completely in the wonder of your love for me and all the rest of us? I think so.

How do you dare to love us all, God? How can you choose us to be your own and walk with us daily? Thank you, God, for the privilege of being one you call beloved, daughter, partner, friend, steward. Give me the courage to see your goodness in all of me and the whole creation. Give me the courage to be grateful.

Catherine Malotky serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as representative for Region 3 (North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota). An ordained pastor, she has also been an editor, teacher, parish pastor, and retreat leader.

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Mail or e-mail to *LWT* Editorial Office

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